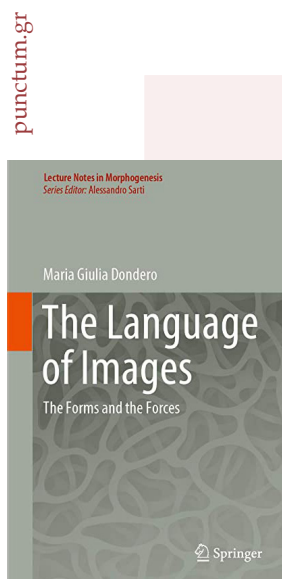


# Renewed semiotics, revisited concepts, new proposals. A few gazes at Maria Giulia Dondero's approach to the image

BY: Katarzyna Machtyl



Dondero, Maria Giulia 2020

## The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces

Lila Roussel. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 147 pp. € 124,79 (hardcover, ISBN 978-3-030-52619-1), € 96,29 (eBook ISBN 978-3-030-52620-7).

To say that reading Maria Giulia Dondero's book *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces* is a journey through the fascinating world of images is not enough. To say that it is another of the many books devoted to visual semiotics is to say nothing. The book I am reflecting on here is a proposal for an innovative gaze (sic!) at a single image, an image in relation to other images, and, finally, at big visual data in semiotic optics.

For a researcher inducted into visual semiotics mainly through Roland Barthes' or Umberto Eco's works, such as myself, reading Dondero's book was an exciting encounter with an intriguing new conceptual framework employed by the author in a no less fascinating way. Sharing at this point a personal reflection, it is with an undisguised pleasure that I want to mention Maria Giulia Dondero's visit to my department (Department of Cultural Semiotics, Cultural Studies Institute) in April 2019. During that short visit, Prof. Dondero presented two significant issues later discussed in the book, so I am exceptionally fortunate to be a reader and, at the same time, a listener of Prof. Dondero's latest research.

Dondero's book is both interesting and highly complex. The author consistently follows a structuralist path. From the

### ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 07

Issue: 01

Summer 2021

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2021.0012

Pages: 171-180

By: Katarzyna Machtyl

Lic.: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

first chapter onwards, the issues of language, system, *langue* and *parole* are crucial for her, and so she refers to the sources of structuralist thought in the humanities. She takes Greimas and Greimas-inspired semiotics as the foundation of her approach, i.e., she draws directly on the thought of the author of *Du sens*, as well as his followers, with Jacques Fontanille at the forefront. As I have mentioned, so far, I have been closer to Barthes' and Eco's approach to visual semiotics, which I will discuss in a moment. At the same time, I admit that Greimas' and the Greimasian approach have been less familiar to me.

## 1. Languages: verbal, visual, meta-. Greimas-inspired semiotics

The book's departure is summarized by the key statement that "verbal language [is not] the 'global interpreter' of all other semiotic systems." (Kuhn 2020: vi). In general, structural semiotics and semiology have taught us to see in visual representations the structure of verbal language. A prominent example of this is the Tartu-Moscow School, which proposed a semiotics founded on the conception of culture as a sign system based on natural language – just to recall their early thinking concerning primary and secondary modeling systems. A no less noteworthy example of the assumption of the verbal foundations of visual objects is the so-called 'rhetoric of the image.' Its very name points to the foundation of what is visual on what is verbal. Barthes and Eco were the leading champions of the 'rhetoric of the image' approach in the 1960s and 1970s. While Barthes, in his *Rhétorique de l'image*, analyzes the advertising image in close reference to the verbal language system, Eco, in *La struttura assente*, points out that the semiological study of the image does not have to be based on linguistics. Instead, we should try to render it independent of linguistics (2003: 123). Both authors, though, develop their 'rhetoric of the image' in relation to linguistic rhetoric. However, in the case of *La struttura assente*, besides the tropes typical of the latter, Eco makes an effort to create tropes specific to visual rhetoric. Not wishing to delve unnecessarily into this issue, let us just note that, as Dondero points out, Barthes' and Eco's semiologies of the image paid too much attention to image content and ideology.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in line with Greimas-inspired semiotics, she is more interested in the composition of the image and its relationships with other images. As far as ideology in visual studies is concerned, in an interview with Kaan Tanyeri from Turkey Semiotics Cycle in April this year, the author stated:

---

<sup>1</sup> Let us note that for some authors this is an unquestionable advantage of semiotic analysis - e.g. Gillian Rose sees a very strong critical load in these concepts, which she assesses unequivocally positively (Rose 2001: Ch. 4).

I think that what has changed in recent times is that we understand that images can be studied in a more profound way than along the lines of Barthes' approach or according to a philosophical approach. Semiotics allows people to understand that an image is a discourse and that it may produce arguments and meta-reflection. The field of visual studies also contributes to the understanding of images, but the problem with visual studies is the ideology that guides the reading of images and prevents from understanding the meaning of an image based on the analysis of its spatial composition as such. (Dondero 2021)

Regarding the author's distance from other significant achievements in scientific reflection on the image, one should mention Dondero's skepticism towards visual studies, specifically William J.T. Mitchell. While becoming acquainted with the author's problematic in *The Language of Images* during live meetings and through reading, I got the impression that some of her concepts are almost parallel to Mitchell's findings, especially his critical iconology. In a nutshell, the latter postulates that the icon should overcome logos, free the image from the dominion of language, and analyze images through other images (1994). Dondero, however, has more than once expressed her distance from the American author's thought, whether in a live discussion or her book. Dondero is closer to Gottfried Boehm's thought and his *ikonische Wendung* (Dondero 2020: 4, footnote 17), whose approach is more comparable to Greimas-inspired semiotics.

Knowing more or less where Dondero stands in relation to visual studies and rival, so to speak, concepts that emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the field of visual semiotics, let us move on to the essence, i.e., to outline the foundations of the author's concept presented in the book under review. As I have already mentioned, the reflections proposed here are of a rather general and selective character; a summary of the whole book makes no sense and would be impossible here. Therefore, I will refer to those elements of the book I consider essential and encouraged me to revise my stance. Let us begin with the distinction between semiotics and semiology. As Dondero observes:

The research conducted by Barthes (1977) on the relationship between verbal and visual languages is based on the attempt to uncover a manner of decomposing photography into units. Such units, according to Barthes, would correspond to lexical segmentation, which entails that his semiology conceives of verbal language as the sole metalanguage capable of describing all other languages. Semiotics, for its part, aims to demonstrate that there are metalinguistic procedures in all non-verbal languages such as the language of gestures,

of images, of music, etc. [...] Semiology is therefore conceived by Barthes as a translinguistics by virtue of which verbality would lie at the core of any signification. (Dondero 2020: 76).

Verbal language, according to Barthes, is a metalanguage for visual language, while the author, following the path marked out by Greimas, sees things quite differently. Greimas-inspired semiotics, i.e., plastic semiotics, assumes “the plastic reading of an image”; let us note here that there is no question of resigning from the structuralist approach. Nobody says that there is no such thing as a visual language or a language of images. These findings are common for Barthesian semiology and Greimasian semiotics. However, the difference is dramatic: for Barthes, verbal language is a metalanguage for the image, whereas plastic semiotics speaks of a visual metalanguage. As Dondero notes, Greimasian semiotics abandons the distinction between denoted and connoted messages and the idea of “the dependency of images upon the divisions of verbal language” (2020: 77) thanks to the postulates of plastic semiotics and the concept of uttered enunciation to which the author devotes a great deal of attention.

According to Dondero, plastic semiotics enabled us “to conceive images as relations of similarity and of difference, or of relations of contradiction, contrariety, similarity, opposition, expansion, and contraction which make sense within a frame.” Thus conceived, the image “will consist in a composition of forces in tension rather than in an addition of separate units” (2020: 77).

Hence, we have here an almost Saussurean account of the system in terms of identities and differences, but also a typically Greimasian reliance on logical operations inherent in the Greimasian semiotic square, as well as in the modalities associated with it, to which, by way of Fontanille’s account, Dondero repeatedly refers.

## 2. Conflicting gazes, contradictory forces

Dondero looks at images comprehensively, interested both in the single image and in large collections of images. Drawing on the computer tools used by Lev Manovich for cultural analysis, she examines visual grammar but also “the social *statuses* and the interpretative frameworks which govern the functioning of the images” (2020: 1). One might get the impression that there are too many threads here, but nothing could be further from the truth. Dondero’s argument is lucid and develops methodically, with each chapter building upon the findings of the previous ones. The theoretical perspective for the entire monograph is the Greimas-inspired semiotics.

Regarding the concept of enunciation and in the context of what we have already established in the first part of this review, let us now consider the question posed by Dondero: "How does one look at an image?" (2020: 3). This question points to what distinguishes Greimas-inspired semiotics: enunciation and modalities. It is not so much the meaning of the image itself (or the meanings, if we think of implicit or connotative meanings) that is relevant, and since this is the case, neither is its interpretation relevant. So what is essential? So how "the images' planes of expression and content are established" (Dondero 2020: 3), the gesture of establishing the image, both by its producer and spectator, is essential. The author's statement, "it is useful to stress from the onset that the goal of the semiotic approach is not to interpret the image, but to analyze it," should now become easier to understand. (Dondero 2020: 3). It may seem surprising, especially to those eager to combine semiotics with hermeneutics, but it is perhaps the most semiotic possible point of view.

"I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor" (2000: 3), Barthes writes in his late book on photography. This is no longer the Barthes of the early, structuralist period of *The Photographic Message* (1977) or *The Rhetoric of an Image* (1977). Barthes' delight at looking at the eyes that looked at another person in the past recalls the multiplicity and conflict of gazes examined by Dondero. Applying Benveniste's concept of enunciation to the field of visibility has resulted in the coining of the term visual enunciation, by which Dondero, following Fontanille, means "a relation of conflict between the enunciator and the enunciatee (Fontanille 1989), that is, between the simulacrum of the images' producer and the simulacrum of its spectator" (2020: 7-8). The term considers spatial relations and relations between enunciator and enunciatee who actively participate in a given visual discourse.

Thus, within the image, we can speak of a "system of gazes" (Dondero 2020:24), and this is, in my opinion, one of the most intriguing issues presented in the monograph. The image, moreover, has the power to determine the position of the spectator, so we have the gazes of the 'sender' and the 'receiver,' to use terms from a slightly different dictionary, but also the gaze of the 'image,' of the subject depicted in it. *Susanna and the Elders* (1555-1556), the painting analyzed by Dondero, is an exquisite example of such circulation of gazes. She admits that "It is a painting by Tintoretto which, in a very exemplary manner, is presented as a conflict between gazes and perspectives which construct an irreducible tension between the forces at work within the painting" (2020: 33). The analysis proposed by Dondero is highly complex and surprises me every time. The same is true for the examples analyzed by the author, be they paintings or photographs. What is striking in all of these is the application of the theoretical construct, the notion of visual enunciation, to the analysis of concrete images, the reference to Fontanille's semiotic square, and the attention paid to metapictorial devices such as mirrors, reflections, openings and anything else which "extends the boundaries of the visual field" (Dondero 2020: 38).



### 3. The temporality of a still image

Dondero's attention to the temporality of an image is quite surprising. The generally accepted division of arts is that between spatial (e.g., painting) and temporal (e.g., music) arts. As Virginia Kuhn notes in the book's Foreword,

[S]ketching her argument for a theory of 'uttered enunciation' with regard to the language of images, Dondero remarks, almost in passing, that narrativity in still images has seldom been considered by visual semioticians, due to the 'cumbersome opposition, inherited by the contemporary world, between the spatial arts and the temporal arts.' (Kuhn 2020: v)

while the author herself argues that:

The major challenge is to demonstrate that narrative transformation, which necessarily involves temporal extension, may be supported by a single, isolated, discrete image. Because if we multiply the images, as occurs in press reports and fashion photography series, we necessarily obtain an effect of sequentiality and of duration, where gaps between the images are filled and in which contiguity is established, thereby producing an effect of deployment. Temporal disengagement in the single-scene still image has only been rarely addressed by semiotic studies. (Dondero 2020: 25)

Dondero is not the first to raise this issue, but she is undoubtedly the first to present it in such an interesting way. In Chapter 3, devoted to portraits in the context of the representation of presence, the dialogue between the portrayed and the viewer, the conflict between background and figure, and above all temporality, Dondero asks: "Is presence always conjugated in the present tense? If so, is the portrait's present durative, or is it punctual?" (2020: 50). The question remains what opens a reader to subsequent issues, such as subject's identity, "the gradients of a subject's presence, the model which the image is indeed capable of deforming," etc., which in turns draws attention to the fact that "Even in the case of single-scene still images which seem constituted solely by a figure-ground relation, photographic portraits will present a subject who is temporalized, or even aspectualized" (Dondero 2020: 51). Positioning a portrait on the axis: temporality – aspectuality and past – present – future, and the portrayed person in the context of duration and temporality allows us to look at the still image of which the portrait is, after all, a perfect and at the same time particular example, in a very new way but also to convince ourselves that the division into spatial and temporal arts is very conventional, which semiotics perfectly demonstrates.

Dondero also notices the conflict of gazes mentioned about Tintoretto's painting in portraits. It is about the relation: the gazer the gazed with the indication that gazes in a painted portrait and a photographic portrait are different: the painter, so to speak, translates a sequence of gazes onto the canvas with her/his hand, while the nature of a photographic portrait is different, the creative gesture is based on the is based on a gaze and light and is immediate (Dondero 2020: 53).<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Metalanguage – visual language – the metavisual

Metavisuality is another critical issue addressed by Dondero. Drawing on Saussure, she is interested in the relationship between *langue* and *parole* concerning visual language. In the beginning, we have established that the book's central thesis is to deny the claim that verbal language is a universal language for others, including visual language. However, it remains an open question whether visual language has its metalanguage, and thus a metavisual language. What would be visual *langue* and *parole* in this context?

It is [...] difficult to maintain the two following (extreme) postulates: on the one hand, the existence of a universal visual language and, on the other, the idea according to which each painting may constitute a system in itself, by instituting its own microlanguage. (Dondero 2020: 19)

As Dondero suggests and following the path paved by Greimas and Groupe  $\mu$ , she continues her ponderings.

Dondero considers not only artistic images but also scientific images,<sup>3</sup> mainly from biology, astrophysics, and geophysics. The author observes noticeable differences between artistic and scientific images, but also elements they have in common. For example, Dondero indicates the parallel between a window in an artistic image and a window in images used by biology (see: 2020: 91, 93, 99). In this context, she analyses individual scientific images and, above all, images in sequence, in mutual relations, which allows her to develop a specific *visual language*; not a universal one, but rather a *microlanguage*.

---

<sup>2</sup> In this context Jean Baudrillard's concept is worth mentioning. In his *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* he pays attention to the distinction between something created by a human hand and automatic light-writing: "I dream of an image that would be the *écriture automatique* of the world's singularity, as dreamt of by the Iconoclasts in the famous Byzantine controversy. They contended that only the image in which the divinity was directly present [...] was authentic – an *écriture automatique* of the divine face without any human hand having intervened ('*acheiropoietic*') through a kind of transferprinting analogous to the negative of the photographic film. [...] [t]he photographic act is, in a sense, '*acheiropoietic*.' As automatic light-writing that neither passes through the real nor the idea of the real, photography may be said, by this automaticity, to be the prototype of a literalness of the world, with no interference from human hand." (Baudrillard 2011: 51).

<sup>3</sup> It is necessary to remind here Dondero's previous book, which she wrote together with Fontanille: *The Semiotic Challenge of Scientific Images. A Test Case for Visual Meaning* (2014).

The final significant point for consideration is “media visualization” in the context of visual metalanguage and big visual data. Here, the concept of Lev Manovich and the Cultural Analytics Lab is applied, and the qualitative tools of semiotic analysis meet the quantitative methods of the computation analyses of images. It is noteworthy that a large number of images is a rarity in semiotic analysis. Even the use of computer methods for this purpose may come as no small surprise. However, this is not the end of the story; in a harmonious and coherent way, Dondero combines semiotic (Greimasian) analysis, methods of computer analysis of big visual data (Manovich and Cultural Analytics Lab), and the thesis on the existence of metavisual language, i.e., the possibility of referring images to themselves:

The computational visualizations of images we will now examine are images of images. The purpose of calling them “visualizations” is to thoroughly distinguish them from the images which are at their source—and which constitute their objects of study. Indeed, the objects of these visualizations are large corpora of archived images (Big Visual Data) and they pursue a fundamental objective: Analyzing the images by situating them in a measurable and numerically-controlled space. (Dondero 2020: 101)

The author thus combines the ‘microview’ with the ‘telescopic view,’ i.e., a single image and thousands of images in one set (diagram or montage) are analyzed.

## 5. Content – expression – material substrate

The last issue that moved me while reading *The Language of Images* which I wish to share in this review, is the ‘other side’ of the sign itself and the visual representation understood as a sign structure. To this end, Dondero draws on Hjeltmslev’s distinction between the plane of expression and the plane of content and, within their framework, the form of expression, the substance of expression, the substance of content, and the form of content. As we have established, the content interests her least: “I’m not very interested in the hidden meaning of images! I’m more interested in studying their composition, their genre, and their status,” she notes in the interview (Dondero 2021). The same is true for the use of semiotic theory in the big visual data analysis in Manovich’s approach: “With Manovich’s approach, we are invited to explore vast collections of images where a multitude of parameters intersect so as to allow the singularity of an image to emerge from a corpus, rather than to achieve its semantic stabilization.” As Dondero herself points out (2020: 120), this is a structural defense, for it is difficult to deny the structuralist overtones of this perspective.

Since we have established that the content is of least interest to the author, let us see how she problematizes the expression, which is the focus of her interest.



[i]n the case of images, the plane of expression has been explored exclusively from the standpoint of the form of expression. [...] Greimasian semiotics did not take into consideration the substance of the plane of expression, so as to not diverge from its structuralist orientation. [...] [w]hat the semiotics of images has succeeded in accounting for was the relation between the form of expression and the form of content through the development of semi-symbolic coding [...]. This coding left aside the substrates of the images. (Dondero 2020: 129-130)

In the late 1990s, the distinction between the formal and material substrate made it possible to look at an image as a material object. The materiality of the image is a highly topical issue and is recognized in many different disciplines. The material turn has been taking place for a few years now in the arts and humanities. Dondero's engagement with the image's material aspect combines structural semiology and post-Greimasian semiotics, which might seem impossible at first glance. Interestingly, the question of a painting's materiality is raised by Dondero in the context of digitalized paintings. There is no question of paper and silver halide, not to mention canvas and paint. In the interview quoted earlier, the author is quite explicit: "Current visual semiotics is also studying the image as materiality and is contributing to the material turn that began in visual anthropology" (Dondero 2021). I find it a fascinating path for the development of semiotics, as the author herself writes in the *Conclusion*:

The approach which values the syncretism of an image's substrate and that which is applied to it fills a gap in semiotic studies and proposes methodological tools for the material turn. [...] – and at the same time it is an attempt [add. K.M.] – to reconcile the material turn with the computational analysis of large collections of images. (Dondero 2020: 145)

## 6. Renewed, revisited, reasserted

Maria Giulia Dondero's latest book presents "Dondero's enhanced semiotic theory," as Kuhn stresses in the *Foreword* (2020: iv). The author draws on classical semiotic premises and their more recent transformations and shows how we can use them to analyze both artistic and scientific images and digital big visual data. The author convinces her readers that verbal language is not a universal metalanguage for various sign systems. Instead, one can speak of a visual metalanguage and individual *microlanguages*, a rare position in visual semiotics that reinforces the conviction that we can practice visual semiotics in many ways.

In a way, this book defies the obvious: it exposes the narrativity and temporality of the still image, focuses on its form and substrate rather than its meaning, and gradates rather than uses simple oppositions. Maria Giulia Dondero's book opens the reader's eyes to the image and allows a different perspective on visual semiotics and a new way of thinking about seemingly obvious issues.

## References

- Barthes, Roland 1977. The Photographic Message. Trans. Stephen Heath. In: *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Press, 15-31.
- Barthes, Roland 1977. The Rhetoric of an Image. Trans. Stephen Heath. In: *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Press, 32-51.
- Barthes, Roland 2000[1980]. *Camera Lucida. Reflections of Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. London: Vintage Books.
- Baudrillard, Jean 2011[2007]. *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*. Trans. Chris Turner. Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Dondero, Maria Giulia and Jacques Fontanille 2014. *The Semiotic Challenge of Scientific Images. A Test Case for Visual Meaning*. Ottawa: Legas Publishing.
- Dondero, Maria Giulia 2020. *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*. Trans. Lila Roussel. Cham: Springer.
- Eco, Umberto 2003[1968]. *Nieobecna struktura [The Absent Structure]*, trans. into Polish Adam Weinsberg and Paweł Bravo. Warszawa: KR.
- Kuhn, Virginia 2020. Foreward. In: Maria Giulia Dondero, *The Language of Images. The Forms and the Forces*. Cham: Springer.
- Mitchell, William John Thomas 1994. The Pictorial Turn. In: *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 11-34.
- Rose, Gillian 2001. *Visual methodologies. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.
- Visual Semiotics. Maria Giulia Dondero & Kaan Tanyeri (An Interview)*, 2021. <https://turkgostergebilimi.com/visual-semiotics/?fbclid=IwAR2wDr--Qa3oaxl-U4afKVr-RgfoC3JvFbPf-JPWYYghY7owTODUhmDIg4Yo>

### AUTHOR

**Katarzyna Machtyl** Assistant Professor, Department of Cultural Semiotics, Cultural Studies Institute, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland.

